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THE LAS' DAY

BY • IMOGEN • CLARK

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Flowers of Parmessa
Marpessa

But if I live with Idas, then we two
On the low Earth shall prosper hand in hand
In & down of the open field, and live
In peaceful noises of the farm, and watch
The pastoral fields burned by the setting sun.
And he shall give me passionate children, not
Some radiant god that will despise me quite,
But clambering limbs and little hearts that err
And I shall sleep beside him in the night,
And fearful from some dream shall touch his
hand

Secure; or at some festival we two
Will wander through the lighted city streets;
And in the crowd I'll take his arm and feel
Him closer for the press. So shall we live.
And though the first sweet sting of love be past
The sweet that almost venom is, though you
With tender and extravagant delight,
The first and secret Kiss by twilight hedge,

The same fare will repeated o'er and o'er,
Pass off; there shall succeed a faithful peace.
Beautiful friendship tried by sun and wind,
Durable from the daily dust of life.

But thought with sadder, still with kinder eyes,
We shall behold all frailties, ~~or~~ shall haste
to pardon, and with melting minds to bless.
Then tho' we must grow old ^{we} shall grow old
together, and he shall not greatly miss
my bloom faded, and waning light of eyes,
Too deeply gazed in ever to seem dim;
Nor shall we murmur at, nor much regret
The years that gently bend us to the ground,
And gradually incline o'er faces; that we
Lie surely sleeping, and with each slow step
May curiously inspect our lasting home.
But we shall sit with luminous holy smiles
Endeared by many griefs, by many a joy,
And custom sweet of living side by side;
And free of memories nor unkindly glance
Upon each other. Last, we shall descend
Into the natural ground - not without tears -



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BY

IMOGEN CLARK

With Illustrations

By S. OLIVIA RINEHART

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One must go first, ah God, one must go first;
After so long one blow for both were good;
Still like old friends, glad to have met, and leave
Behind a wholesome memory on the Earth.

"The half of music, I have heard men say
Is to have grieved"

"Out of our sadness have we made this
world so beautiful"

THE LAS' DAY.



I.

THE old gray house on the hillside, with its weatherbeaten clapboards and its roof of ragged shingles, stood on the outskirts of the village of Bend's Centre. It was a good mile away from the "Green," where the Meetin'-house, the country store, and a dozen or more houses were grouped in a sociable semicircle bristling with importance. It almost seemed as if, in the march of events, the gray house had been left behind — like some belated straggler — and had never caught up with the others, but had remained there by itself wrapped in tranquil security, growing grayer and older as the years rolled by. Aside from the loneli-

ness of its position, which was to a certain degree pathetic, there was nothing in the humble building to attract more than a casual notice.

I was a summer visitor in the little village, and had passed the house a score of times with no feeling of curiosity as to its inhabitants, their number, age, or sex. To me the grayness and monotony of color seemed typical of their lives. They had peace, but it was the peace and quiet of stagnation. No vain desire of unknown things puzzled their breasts. The world with its storm and stress did not touch them in this quiet country-side. They were content to live their little day knowing nothing of the greater issues at stake, secure and calm as the cattle grazing under the trees, and with no more thought than they. A dull, uneventful life, and the gray house seemed a fit shelter for the folk who called it home.

I had passed it unheedingly, as I have said, or had only noted it as a point to

mark the progress of my day's walk. Once, however, it seemed to me a fair type of the House Beautiful toward which the weary pilgrim journeyed in the old story. It was at the close of a summer day, and the low-lying sun was filling the land with broad shafts of yellow light. They touched the old house, making the clapboards gleam like silver, and turned the windows, with their tiny panes of common glass, into a sparkling mass of gold, with here and there a flash of fiery red, or brilliant green, or royal purple. The perfume of the flowers in the small, old-fashioned garden filled the air. The scent of the roses mingled with the pungent odor of the box that bordered both sides of the little path leading from the gate to the low-hung, sagging door with its worn knocker.

The glory only lasted a few minutes. But as I lingered by the gate, filled with the thought that the lives that seem so cramped and dull to us are transformed

by the touch of Heaven into a beauty the world cannot give, a woman's voice was lifted in sudden song. I could not see the singer, nor was there any particular sweetness in her voice, but the simple words found their way to my heart :

“ While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.”

There was a short pause as if the singer were busy over some household task, then her voice rang out again, clearer and fuller :

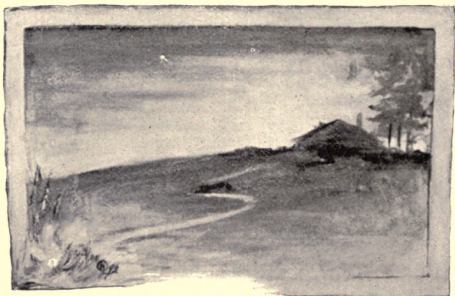
“ All glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace,
Good will henceforth from Heaven to men
Begin and never cease.”

The woman's song died away as suddenly as it had begun. The day was over, and the after-glow that crimsoned the west faded slowly, and the soft shadows of twilight crept up changing the house from

silver to gray. The old prosaic order of things was restored. But as I turned away I noticed one small star piercing the blue right above the house. It seemed like a benediction from God!

That same evening I learned from my voluble landlady that Dave Tucker lived in the gray house. "He's lived there ever sence he was a young 'un, when his uncle Obadiah Bascom 'dopted him. Dave's mother was a Bascom. An' then when Obadiah died an' the house come to Dave he married Marthy Allen from Green River an' brought her home. So there they've lived for nigh on ten years. Happy? Well, yes, I should say! Ez happy ez mortils kin be, — happier than the most of us I'm thinkin'! Though there was a time when they'd most agreed on separatin' all along of some fool quarr'l, but they patched it up between 'em somehow. An' now it do seem ez ef love hed come to stay up to their place. I don't know the true in'ards of the story

myself. Marthy aint one to gossip 'bout her affairs, an' though Dave's a sosh'able man ez you'd meet on a summer's day, he's ez close ez a clam 'bout their makin' up."



II.

THE gray house after that night became a more interesting feature in the landscape, as I passed it daily in my walks. Despite its placid exterior, it had been the scene of warring thoughts and words. Love had almost died there. By what wonderful potion had it been revived? What spell had wrought the peace that had found expression in the woman's singing? Would it not be well, I wondered, if I could discover the secret that had drawn two hearts together when they were at cross purposes and the love that had warmed their hearthstone was growing cold? What would not the world give for such a secret! Ah! what would not I give, weary, and worn, and sad!

By degrees I ventured upon a nearer acquaintance with the inmates of the house, but Mrs. Tucker was hedged about with a fine reserve which I could not penetrate. She was a small, narrow-shouldered woman, with a sweet face, that still showed traces of a beauty which must have been hers in girlhood; but though she met my overtures smilingly she held me at a distance, and I used to leave her presence with my questions unasked. It was no vulgar curiosity that impelled me to learn the story of their reconciliation. The unhappiness in my own life urged me to discover the means that had been instrumental in bringing about their happiness. It almost seemed to me that, could I know their story, the rough road of my future would suddenly be made smooth.

If the exterior of the old house had symbolized peace, the interior more surely and exactly carried out that promise. There was a tender happiness pulsating in the air that soothed my weary heart

from the first moment I caught a glimpse of the general living-room. I had made my entrance with the modest request for a glass of water, and lingered chatting to my hostess, who met my advances with some timidity of manner. I admired the old china with all the enthusiasm of a genuine collector, but my warm phrases were of no avail. Mrs. Tucker only waxed superficially communicative.

"The chiny hed ben Aunt Sophrony Allen's, an' them pewter porringers hed b'longed to ole Mis Bascom."

With that information I was obliged to take my leave, but I did not so easily give up the attack.

Frequently I stopped at the kitchen door on one errand or another, and was always met by the same gentle smile and ready hospitality, though I was conscious of a dignity in the little country-woman which would have resented any questions concerning her history as an impertinence on my part. I chatted with her in her

garden, and received from her hands on many occasions "posies" bound about with long ends of "stripéd grass," but she did not give me what my heart was longing for, and for what I could make no demand. She seemed like a spirit of content at all times, but especially so in her garden, which was a riot of color and old-fashioned flowers. White roses climbed over the little porch and nodded their sweet faces in the breeze, and in the beds — kept in bounds by the orderly box — were mignonette and boy's-love, pansies, common striped carnations, love-lies-bleeding, sweet-williams, and great, flaming hollyhocks, while near the gate grew clumps of succory as blue as the summer sky, and

"Sweet peas on tiptoe for a flight
With wings of gentle flush o'er delicate white."

I noticed from the first that, although she tended all the flowers with loving care, she lingered longest and most fondly by the hardy little sweet-williams, nor can I

recall a time during our acquaintance when she did not wear a handful of their blossoms either at her throat or on her breast. It was such an unusual thing in one of her class, that I found myself wondering at her adornment.

"You seem very fond of that flower," I said to her once. She put her hand to her breast and covered the nodding blossoms with a quick, half shy, half proud gesture, while a rush of color dyed her thin cheeks. "Yes," she answered with an awkward laugh, "I am powerful fond of it."

Then she moved away, as if resenting further questions. She was as elusive as the yellow-winged butterflies in her garden, and as shy of any approach as they. When I knew her better, I respected the dignity that kept this record of her life sacred, though for a long time, accustomed as I was to my landlady's garrulity, I resented the silence that so effectually thwarted my plans. Had I told her of my own sorrow, her experience might

have prompted her to sympathize and aid me; but, with that strange, unaccountable shrinking one woman so often feels towards another, I could not speak of my past life. I was too shy to unveil my feelings to strange eyes.

III.

I DID not progress better with the husband, Dave Tucker. He was a tall, angular fellow of five and thirty or thereabouts, with a frank, open face, pleasant eyes, and smiling mouth. He was inclined to be talkative, and even merry. Often in passing the gray house I would hear his cheerful whistle as he worked his land, and he was never too busy to grudge me a few minutes' chat. Despite this apparent friendliness, we never got beyond the crops or the probabilities of dry or wet weather. Personalities, as far as he was concerned, were rigidly excluded. Now and then, as the time slipped by, he enlivened his chat with some bit of gossip about his neighbors or some quaint criticism of their doings. But there was no word about

himself. I think it never occurred to the simple fellow that I would — or could — be interested in his own life and feelings.

One afternoon towards the end of the summer, when my stay in the little primitive village was drawing to a close, I stopped at a field where he was working and called to him. He looked up at the sound of my voice and then lounged towards me, a broad smile lighting up his face. I had my arms full of golden-rod, and as he came up I held out some stalks to him.

"It do beat all," he said reflectively, and with no other sign of greeting, "how you City folks go about pickin' up sech trash an' a-deckin' out of yourselves! We don't never think of sech things."

"Your wife does," I laughed mischievously. "She always wears some sweet-williams."

"Oh, my wife!" he said, with an unconscious lowering of his voice. "Yes, I know — God bless her!"

He seemed to forget my presence after that little speech, and stood gazing far beyond me, with a soft, almost reverential expression on his face, such as I had seen on several occasions when he had spoken to his wife.

"I shall be going back to town in a few days now," I went on after a moment, recalling him from his thoughts.

He started at the sound of my voice. "Aint that rayther suddint?" he asked. "But I s'pose you've a hankerin' for your own home."

I laughed a trifle bitterly. "Oh, yes! I have a hankering for my home," I said.

He had spoken without much show of interest and as if his thoughts were elsewhere, but there was that in my tone that stung him into instant attention. He looked at me gravely, wonderingly, appreciating that something was amiss, and yet — great, tender hearted fellow! — reluctant to cause me pain by evincing any curiosity. But the feeling that denied him

speech found expression in his glance. I met his earnest brown eyes — as earnest and tender as a dog's in their mute, loving sympathy — with a quickening heart-beat.

"I've no home worth the name," I said, breaking down my proud reserve. I half turned from him as I spoke, then with a sudden impulse I turned back and put my hands on his arm. The golden-rod fell to the ground, and lay unheeded at my feet.

"Mr. Tucker," I cried, "will you tell me about the time when you and your wife came near parting? Ah! don't refuse me," I went on, as he shrank from my touch and the color flamed up into his sensitive face, "and don't think me meddlesome because I ask to hear your story."

"It's too sacred to tell," he muttered beneath his breath.

"Yes, yes, I know," I interposed; "it is sacred, but you will tell it to me, won't you? Listen! I am not happy. I came here for rest, and I am going away to try

to find it. I shall be searching for it my whole life long, and will never find it perhaps, unless you help me now. There was a time when I was as happy as you are, and then the something that made life worth living died, and very existence became hateful. Oh! don't you understand? We loved each other, — my husband and I, — but there were little jars and frets, and the days that had seemed so warm and golden grew gray and cold, and everything was changed. It may have been my fault, — I was so quick and inconsiderate, — but I never told him that. And so, with the unhappiness growing daily, it seemed best for us to part! When I go back to the little home, I shall find only loneliness and regret there, and wherever I go in the world I shall only meet loneliness and regret. For I have n't given over loving him, and my heart is back in the old days. And I know he feels as I do, but what can we do? We were both so proud, — we are both so proud! Oh!

if there is any way back, won't you show me that way? You, who trembled upon the very brink of unhappiness and are now so happy, won't you help me before it is too late?"

"Ef I felt ez ef it would be a help," he said irresolutely, shifting from one foot to the other, "I would n't hold back. It would seem like 'a call,' but I don't know —" His words trailed off into silence, and for a few minutes he stood gazing before him with puzzled eyes. "I don't like to talk 'bout them times much," he went on; "I'm right down sorry to disapp'int ye, Ma'm, but there's some things a man don't keer to let the world know, an' that's one of 'em."

"You know best," I said, a little sadly. "I thought — I hoped —"

He stooped down and looked into my face without speaking. If I had been a whit less sincere he would have discovered it in a moment, though he was far from being what the world calls a shrewd

man. The honesty of his nature seemed to give him an unerring penetration which pierced my heart and the thoughts lurking there. I felt that he saw me as I was, and through a sympathy which may have come to him in his sorrow he recognized the truth of my words. As I met his glance I knew that he was ready to comply with my wish. He helped me up on the stone wall which formed the boundary of the field where he had been working. When I had settled myself comfortably there, he leaned against the upright of the gate and began his story, in his soft, drawling tones, without any further preamble.

IV.

“WE'D hed words an' words, an' we could n't agree nohow! It seemed to me it was all her fault, an' it seemed to her it was all mine, — though I could n't see how that was! — but there we was a-hurtin' each other with our bitter looks an' our bitterer words, — we who hed promised to love an' cherish one another while mortil life lasted in us. But laws sakes! 't was too much to expect, an' we jest could n't keep to our barg'in, so we agreed to say good by, an' part ez peaceable ez we could. An' so the las' day come 'round.” He drew his breath hard for a moment, as though the memory were too much for him, then he went on again.

“It wa'n't much of a day outside, for the sky was gray an' lowerin'. I allowed it would come on to pour before nightfall,

an' it 'peared to me ole Ma'm Nature did look oncommon desolate even ef it was November. There wa'n't no signs of life to be seen anywheres, everything seemed so cold an' dead. The trees tossed their branches about for all the world jest like human arms, an' they seemed to p'int at me an' then at the house, an' the creakin' sounded jest like words. An' one little tree whispered sorter comfortin', 'Go home! go home!' But the big trees bent down ez ef they was laughin', an' sez they, 'Where's his home? That's only his house, where's his home?' An' then the wind picked up the words, an' moaned 'em out, 'Where's his home? Where's his home?'

"It almost druv me crazy a-standin' there lookin' at the ole house an' knowin' that them words was the Gospil truth. It wa'n't my home! A man's heart's got to be in his home before it'll be anything more to him than jest a house. An' there's got to be suthin' more than tables

an' chairs an' furnychoor to make it wuth the livin' in. There 's got to be sunshine, an' lovin' words, an' lovin' looks, — God's sunshine I call 'em ! An' where they come it don't matter what kind of a house holds 'em, whether it 's wood, or stun, or jest a hovel, it'll be a home wuth the goin' to. But bless ye, Ma'm! that sunshine hed n't ben in our house for a drefle long time, an' so I knowed the big trees an' the wind spoke the truth when they asked kinder malicious, 'Where's his home?' I tell ye it makes a man feel oncomfort'ble to hear sech a truth ez that. It fills him chock full of longin's, 'specially ef he remembers when the ole house was jest the dearest, sweetest home, filled with sunshine all the year round. But mine hed grown cold, an' the sunshine hed faded out, an' me an' my wife was goin' our separat ways, for the las' day hed come. I knowed that on the morrer she would go back to her own people, an' I would hev the ole house to myself. 'Go home! go

home!' whispered the little tree, so low that the big trees could n't hear her. 'It'll be lonesomer to-morrer when she's gone, it'll seem more like home to-day, — the las' day, — because she's there an' ye know ye loved her oncet.'

"I jest dragged my cap down over my ears to shet out what the wind an' the big trees would say, an' walked toward the kitching door ez onconsarned ez I could, whistlin' so ez not to surprise her. I'd calkerlated, ye see, on not comin' back till nightfall, an' I'd kerried my dinner away in a pail; but that there little tree an' my feelin's was too strong for me an' druv me back. So I whistled 'Greenland's Icy Mountings' ez loud an' cheerful ez possible; but when I opened the kitching door there wa' n't nobody in the room, an' of course I could n't call, though I minded that often an' often when I'd come home unbeknownst an' shouted, 'Marthy! Marthy!' through the house, she'd come laughin' from garret or cellar to meet me

an' — But shoh ! all them days was over an' gone."

He paused and looked beyond him with a gaze that did not take in the beauties of the summer afternoon. He was lost in a reverie that was full of sadness. The warm, wide fields about us, the distant hills so clearly defined against the bright sky, the chirping of the birds in the trees close at hand, said nothing to him. He stood there motionless, as if he were carved out of stone, a rough, unpicturesque figure, in common, working-day garments, with wide, yearning eyes, looking not to the future with hope but back to the past with sorrow. He hardly seemed alive, save that now and again his mouth twitched like one in suffering.

"Don't tell me any more if it hurts you so," I cried.

He turned at the sound of my voice, half dazed for the moment, and not knowing me, so vividly was he living over those past days of his. Then he recalled him-

self with a start, and with a half pathetic smile took up the thread of his story.

“The kitching was a deal sight loner than the day outside an’ the whisperin’ trees an’ wailin’ wind, though there was a good fire in the stove an’ the kettle was singin’ away softly at the back. All my things was there fixed mighty comfort’ble I’ll allow. There was my favrit chair settin’ in my corner, but bless ye! I wa’n’t thinkin’ of my things. I missed suthin’ the moment ever I stepped my foot in the room. It was her chair, the little rush-bottomed chair with the bright red rockers, that useter stand so near mine. Of course ’t was hers to do with ez she pleased, an’ when we’d settled on partin’ she sez to me, ‘There’s one thing I’d like to take away,— the little chair you gave me.’

“I knowed what it was before she’d asked, her voice trembled so, an’ I sez, ‘Yes, yes!’ kinder gruff, for I felt a lump in my throat, an’ I hed to swaller hard to git it down. I s’pose she felt I was

onfeelin' then, but I knowed why she wanted it. It wa' n't because I give it to her, — I wa' n't sech a fool ez to think that! — but because she useter rock the little one to sleep in that chair. An' ye see, I thought ef she hed ben more consid'rate an' hed respected my feelin's she would n't hev asked for it. She'd ought to hev known that the ole room would be lonesome without it! I sot sech a store by that chair! Ye would n't s'pose now, that because it hed ben taken away the place would look so bare. But it did, an' the very fust step I took into the kitching that day I missed it, an' then I knowed that she hed put it with her things ready ag'in the morrer. I'd ben hopin' she'd overlook it, for it would hev ben a little homelike to hev seen it settin' there. It jest come over me all of a heap that it was gone, an' I set right down in my chair an' covered my eyes up so ez not to see the bareness. An' everything come back to me! I s'pose it was all along of its bein' the

las' day that I remembered so clearly, jest ez they say at the Great Las' Day we'll remember all the things that ever we did here. Ez I set there my mind was full of picters, an' fust of 'em all come the time when I bought that chair."

He broke off here to ask me if I was comfortable, and when I had assured him that I was, he went on with his story, his sombre face lighting up with the memories his words evoked.

"It was a July afternoon. I'd ben over to West Sudbury seein' Farmer Miller 'bout a colt, an' drivin' down Main Street I caught sight of that chair with its bright red rockers. I stopped then an' there an' barg'ined with the store-keeper for it. I was so proud when we come to terms that I would n't let him put no wrappin's round it, but jest h'isted it up alongside o' me an' druv off. It was nigh sundown when I druv up to our door, an' I kin smell the smell of the box as it come to me then, an' see the flowers a-noddin'

softly in the summer air to this very day. She run out to meet me, an' she looked so pretty in her caliker frock with the little sweet-william blossom — my favrit flower — tucked in her waist-band, that my heart jest leaped right into my mouth. She allers wore some sweet-williams for my sake, an' she wears 'em still for me, God bless her! She stud on the step shadin' her eyes with her hand, a-smilin' an' nod-din' at me.

“‘I’ve got suthin’ for ye, Mis Tucker,’ sez I. I called her ‘Mis Tucker’ jest to see her change color. Ye see she hed n’t owned that name but a fortnight, an’ she felt mighty important ’bout it. Then I handed down the chair to her, an’ she tuk it in her arms, an’ sez she, ‘My! aint it a beauty?’ An’ then she put it on the step an’ set right down in it, rockin’ back’ards an’ for’ards, for all the world jest like a child pleased with a new toy. It made me oncommon happy to see her a-settin’ there in the sunshine, the very prettiest girl in

these parts, an' to know that she was allers goin' to stay with me ontill Death come to part us. My eyes was kinder misty ez I went off to the barn to put Dolly up, an' for all my gladness I felt a good deal of seriousness come over me. I jest could n't help feelin' grateful to God for lettin' her be my wife, an' I felt ez ef I ought to be prayin', only I never was much of a prayin' chap, so I moved about kinder slow an' sollum, an' then she come out to help me. She hung on to my arm, I remember, when we went into supper. After the dishes was cleared away an' the place tidied up, we set out on the doorstep, me in my big, ole chair, an' she in her new little one, side by side, a-holdin' each other's hands, talkin' an' keepin' still. That's the way we useter do all summer, an' when the weather growed cold then our chairs was still side by side in doors. An' one night, near Thanksgivin' time, when she was rockin' back'ards an' for'ards in her chair, she told me suthin' ez made

me feel like the very proudest an' happiest man in the hull world. All that winter she useter set by my side in the evenin's busy fashionin' some funny little clothes.

"Do ye wonder that I loved that chair, an' that I growed to love it more when after the baby come she would set there with him in her arms rockin' an' singin'? She's a voice jest like a bird's an' she'd sing all my favrit songs an' all her own, an' some was funny an' some was sad, but she loved the hymn tunes best. There was one that I was powerful fond of too. It was all about the shepherds' watchin' their flocks at night, an' the angels appearin' with "tidin's of great joy," tellin' them that Jesus was born. When she sung that tune I useter think of that young Mother, so many years ago, singin' to her little Baby an' lovin' Him, for all the world jest like my wife loved our little one. An' it come over me then that that Baby held the key in His little fingers to unlock all the treasures of Heaven and of

airth too. For His key is jest Love ! An' then it seemed to me, a-settin' there in the shadder watchin' my wife an' our little chap, that all the babies ever sence hev brought keys with 'em from God, an' they unlock our hearts an' teach us the truest kind o' love, — the love that takes care of an' watches over, an' makes a man think o' suthin' else in this world besides his own self. Why, when our baby was here, it seemed to me my heart was jest runnin' over with good will to everybody. — Did ye say anything, Ma'm ? ”

I shook my head, for I was so touched by his simple recital that I could not trust myself to speak.

“ Well, them was happy times,” he went on, with a smile deepening in his eyes, “ an' the boy growed strong an' big. We useter hev sech frolics every night before his bedtime. He 'd come an' set on my knees, an' Marthy she 'd play peek-boo behind my chair, an' laws ! how that young un would chuckle an' holler ! An'

then Marthy would ketch him in her arms an' cuddle an' kiss him, an' call him a thousand pretty names a minute. She loved him with all her heart, an' he loved her back. He was powerful fond of me too, but I wan't nowheres besides his 'Ma'm.' It almost kilt her when he was taken. He was jest past his third birthday, an' was so strong we never thought he'd git sick. But there was scarlit fever all 'round, an' he tuk it an' Marthy she was like one possessed. She would n't let no one tech him, she jest tuk care of him night an' day. An' it seemed ez ef he did n't want her to go out of his sight, he useter look at her with sech lovin' eyes an' cry, 'Ma'm! Ma'm!' I'd set for hours on the stairs jest outside the room longin' to do suthin', jest to hold him an' soothe him mebbe, but she would n't let me try. She was so fierce about it too that the Doctor sez we'd better humor her. But for all her lovin' an' nussin' she could n't keep him with her!



“After that she went about the house like a shadder, never smilin’ an’ hardly ever speakin’, but jest lookin’ cold an’ still an’ ez ef she’d ben crushed. I couldn’t git her to chirk up ’tall. Come evenin’s we’d set down in our chairs, an’ I’d try to cheer her an’ tell her ’bout the gossip down to the store, but she’d jest set an’ watch the fire an’ never hear a blessed word I’d say. An’ bimeby she moved her chair, — that little rocking-chair, — over to the other side of the chimbley ez ef she wanted to think her own thoughts. I let her alone then, an’ read the ‘Pioneer,’ an’ looked at the funny picters in the Almanac, but the evenin’s was dreffle long, for I’m sosh’able myself, an’ it taint pleasant to set so mum.

“That was the beginnin’ of it, Ma’m! I did think o’ the little chap, an’ missed him more than ever I could tell. I useter think ’bout him when I’d be at my work, an’ it would come over me all of a suddint that he was gone, an’ many’s the time I’ve

jest set right down an' cried, longin' for him ag'in. P'r'aps I did n't miss him the way she did, for I was workin' outdoors pretty near all day ; but my heart was heavy with his loss even ef I did n't say much 'bout it. I never was much of a hand to talk 'bout what I felt deepest. An' I don't say that it did n't come hardest on her, for she 'd hed all the nussin' to do, though I was longin' to help her. But it seemed to me she hed n't no right to make me of no account, an' to think me onfeelin' jest because I whistled 'round the house an' at my work. Sometimes a man whistles gay tunes even ef his heart is heavy, — he aint a-thinkin' o' the tunes. Whistlin' is second nature to some men ! But she did n't onderstand me, an' we'd ben man an' wife for goin' on five years.

“ At fust I tried honest not to whistle, but I might jest ez well hev tried to stop breathin' an' live. I jest could n't do it nohow ! The fust time she looked hurt, an' I stopped short ez ef I'd ben shot.

But after that, when the whistle would come in spite of me, an' she'd toss up her head impatient an' scornful, then I did feel angry. An' oncet I *did* bang out o' the house, an' I *did* whistle ez I passed the winder jest on purpose. It wa'n't long before the hard words come on top of the hard looks. The fust we hed was all along of a batch o' doughnuts. We hed n't hed no doughnuts nor pies for a dreffle long time, an' I was jest hankerin' for some. I asked her pleasant-like about 'em, — well, p'r'aps I did put it in too jokin' a way, but I thought that would be the best thing to do, — an' she flared right up, an' so the quarr'l began. I did n't think to tell her then that a man kin be heart-hungry an' yet hev a cravin' for doughnuts an' sech things ef he's ben workin' out in the open air, an' he kin remember an' love his little dead baby even ef he's got a powerful appetite. I might hev said it in a soothin' fashion, an' she could n't hev growed angry, but bless ye! I did n't think

of that till I was out in the barn by myself mendin' Dolly's harness, an' then it was too late! We'd hed our words then, an' they hed ben very hard, cruel ones. When I come into dinner she 'd a batch o' doughnuts on the table an' her eyes was all red; but she did n't say nothin', an' I did n't either. An what's more, I did n't tech one of them doughnuts, though they was great, big ones an' my mouth jest watered a-lookin' at 'em.

"After that we hed our quarr'ls pretty frequent. Seems to me we never opened our mouths onless it was to say angry words. So with things like that at home, I useter go down to Greene's tavern in the evenin'. At fust it was only oncet a week, come Saturday, to hear the news. An' then, because it was so pleasant an' cheerful there, an' so lonesome an' dull to hcome I went oftener, an' bimeby I useter go every night. Folks begun to gossip an' say 't was hard on Marthy, but some of 'em tuk my side an' sez I was druv to

it. An' then her people stepped in an' talked to her 'bout my goin's-on, an' helped to widen the breach, an' my folks come over to p'int out her dooty. But she was allers strong-willed was Marthy, an' she would n't listen to reason, — she 'd jest do ez she pleased. That's the way with them little women, they 've got wills like iron, an' ye can't bend 'em nohow! They can't be druv, they need gentle handlin'. So one night, ez I was startin' for Greene's, she stopped me an' asked sarcastic-like for a few minutes o' my vally'ble time. That angered me to begin with, an' when she went on an' sez ez how 't was the bitterest thing in the world for her to go on livin' with one who 'd showed hisself onfeelin' an' hed deserted his home, an' she wanted to go back to her own folks, I told her to go an' welcome, an' the sooner she went the better I 'd like it. Then I rushed out, slammin' the door behind me. I did n't go to Greene's that night, though a rum toddy might hev set

me up. I jest wandered about kinder hopeless-like, an' finally I brought up in the churchyard an' stayed there for a long time by the baby's grave. I could n't help feelin', ye see, ef he'd lived, things would hev ben diffrunt, — what with his little lovin' ways, he would a-kept us together!

“I did n't tell Marthy where I'd ben when I went home, I wa'n't led to. I thought she would n't b'l'eve it, though I could hev showed her that I brought away a handful of the asters she'd left on the grave that day. But I did n't tell her, an' the nex' mornin' she sez very cheerful that she'd be ready to go home come Thursday, an' she'd sign any papers I'd want her to. Then I knowed she'd ben makin' her preparations on the sly, but I could n't cross her somehow. An' when she asked for the chair I told her she might hev it, though my heart felt like breakin'. I was too proud to let her see my feelin's, or to try to make up then. But I never sus-

picioned it would hurt so much to find it reelly gone. It kinder makes me quiver all over even now to think o' the time when I fust missed it, that Wednesday, for then I knowed trooly it was the las' day, — our las' day ! ”

He put up his hand, and brushed away the tears that were filling his eyes. There was an unconscious dignity about him that appealed strongly to me. He was not in the least ashamed that I had seen his emotion.

“ There ain't much more to tell,” he said in a husky voice. “ I could n't set no longer in the kitching, it was so still. The hull house was oncommon quiet. An' the thought come over me to account for the stillness that she hed gone away. I called ‘ Marthy ! ’ — not very loud for the word stuck in my throat, — an' I stretched out my arms, but she did n't come to answer my call. Ye see I'd ben hopin' she'd at least say good by, but I told myself then that p'r'aps it hed seemed best to her to

slip away without a sign or a word of partin'? There wa'n't much comfort to be got out of words between us.

"But it was so still, — an' it was stiller upstairs! I peeked into all the rooms, an' everything was clean an' sweet only she wa'n't there. Ez I passed the winders I could see the trees a-wavin' their branches, an' I knowed right well what they was sayin'. I could n't go outdoors to hear 'em mockin' an' laughin' at me, an' I could n't go down stairs ag'in an' miss the little chair, so I jest kep' right on to the garret. I could poke about there for a little while, I thought.

"I crep' into the long, dark room, an' the very fust thing I seed was Marthy in her gray frock a-kneelin' by the baby's high chair. She'd her arms about it, an' her head was down on 'em. I stud still for a moment hardly breathin', then I turned softly to go out ag'in an' to go down stairs to the lonely room. But she did n't stir, so I knowed she hed n't heerd me. I jest



said, 'Marthy!' very low; but still she knelt there, an' then a great fear come over me. P'r'aps she was dead, — p'r'aps, when she'd come to bid good by to the baby's things, her strength hed given out. I don't know to this day how I got acrost the room to her side, but then I saw that she wa' n't dead, — she 'd jest fallen asleep. I stud an' watched her, — 't wa'n't no harm! It was the las' day, an' I wanted to say good by. She seemed so little an' helpless ez she knelt there a-holdin' the chair so lovin'ly! I could only see one cheek, but it looked so soft an' white, — for all the world jest like a late, pale brier-rose, — an' there was tear stains on it an' the drops was standin' in her long lashes. My lips jest trembled to kiss them tears away! Somehow ez I looked at her I forgot all the bitter words we hed hed, an' I could only remember the sweetness she hed brought into my life. I could only think of her ez gentle an' good, an' there was a look about her mouth that was patient, an'

it seemed holy to me too. An' of a suddint I thought of the angels an' 'the tidin's of great joy,' an' that other Mother, an' I felt humbled right away. I don't know how long I stud there. I did n't know what to do, — I wanted to be led to do suthin'. The wind outside was growin' louder, an' it seemed ez ef it was sayin', 'The las' day,' 'The las' day,' over an' over ag'in. I could n't pray. I did n't know what I wanted, only that I wanted suthin'. So I jest stud there sayin' softly to myself, 'O God! O God!' An' then suddintly it seemed ez ef suthin' very small an' soft hed hold of my fingers. It was like a child's hand! Guess a man knows the feel of a little child's hand tug-gin' at his fingers an' tryin' to lead him to do suthin'. I did n't hold back. I jest let myself go, an' the little hand clasped my big one very tight an' drawed it — an' drawed it — down ontill it lay on Marthy's arm. Then the little fingers let go their hold. Marthy stirred an' turned her face

so ez I could see more of it, but she did n't open her eyes. She was still asleep. She gave a great sob ez ef she was dreamin' of suthin' sad, an' cried out, 'Dave! O Dave!'

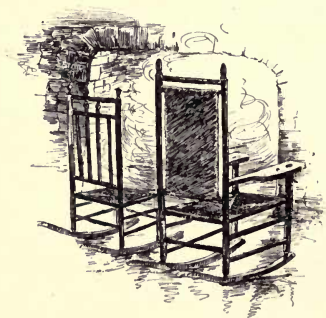
"I drewed back my hand then. She was dreamin' of the little chap. But jest ez true ez ye live, I heerd a child's voice say in my ear, 'She allers called me Baby an' Precious, she never called me Dave!'

"So I knelt right down by Marthy an' put my arms 'round her, an' at that she opened her eyes an' looked at me. She raised her hand, an' I thought fust she was goin' to push me away, but she drewed my face down to hers, an' sez she, jest ez simple ez a little child, 'I was dreamin' o' ye, Dave; I was dreamin' ye was goin' away an' Baby brought ye back to me.' An' all I could say ez I kissed her an' cried over her was, 'So he did, my dear, so he did.'

"An' it was there by the baby's little chair that we made it all up. An' I told

her 'bout my lonesomeness an' my missin' the little chap, an' we growed to onderstand each other. We agreed to let that be the las' day for all bickerin's an' on-kindnesses, an' to live a better life, with God's help, in the days to come.

"It was rainin' outside when we went down to the kitching, an' the trees was tossin' their arms, an' the wind was wailin', but they could n't jeer at me no longer. I thanked God in my heart for the sunshine in my home, an' I thank Him still."



V.

A SILENCE settled down between us as he finished his simple story. I felt strangely awed as if a fellow being's soul had been bared before me, and I had seen into its depths, past the gayety and sunshine, to the holy ground where the shadows lay. I could not speak. This was no time for a conventional expression of gratitude, the feelings his story had stirred lay too deep for words. I leaned toward him with outstretched hand, and as he took it in his strong clasp there came to us faintly on the soft air the sound of a woman's voice calling, "Dave! Dave!"

A bright smile overspread his face, making the homely features almost beautiful.

"I must be goin' home," he said simply, "Marthy wants me. Good night."

He turned from me with a little nod, and strode away through the fields whistling as he went. I watched his tall, round-shouldered figure until a dip in the land hid him from view, then I turned and looked about me. The sun had long since sunk below the horizon, but the clouds in the west were still tinged with its glory. They looked like a row of angels with bowed heads and folded wings. As I watched them idly, they slipped away back to their home, it seemed to me, leaving the door open a little behind them, through which the light of heaven came in a tender glow.

In the near distance stood the old gray house, silhouetted against the sky dark and strong, — a little unpretentious building, — but as I passed it in the twilight I knew in my heart that it was a kingdom of Content!

THE END.

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